



Finding Freedom: Facilitating Postsecondary Pathways for Undocumented Students

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Abstract

College access for undocumented students in the United States continues to be a politically contested issue in many states across the country. Whereas a growing number have created friendly admission policies, such as in-state tuition benefits, other states—like Georgia—impose restrictive guidelines that work to reduce the number of undocumented students enrolling in public higher education. Through analyzing 26 participant interviews, this study examined how Freedom University, a nonprofit organization, worked to help students further their dream of earning a college degree by creating a college-going climate and sharing social and cultural capital to educate students about their postsecondary opportunities.

Keywords

higher education policy, politics of education, postsecondary access, social justice, social movements

Introduction

Throughout our country's history, the United States has been viewed as the land of opportunity, where generations of immigrants have continued to seek its promise of equality in search of the American dream. As our world

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becomes more interconnected in today's global economy, those within the United States require access to public higher education to produce for their families and contribute to our national product. It stands to reason that our global competitiveness will only continue to be strong with an educated workforce that has the ability to access all sectors of public education.

The reality is that each year thousands of undocumented students graduate from our nation's high schools without any guarantee of attending a postsecondary institution. Due to federal law, undocumented children are promised a free K-12 education,¹ but there is no federal policy affording the right to access public higher education. While federal law does not mandate that undocumented students be allowed to attend public institutions, federal law also does not expressly prohibit their admission (Gonzales, 2010). Due to the federal government remaining largely silent on this issue, states and university systems have enacted their own rules and regulations that seek to either promote or deter college access for undocumented students.

To date, over 20 states have passed measures to assist undocumented students in gaining entry to public colleges and universities. They do so by offering in-state tuition benefits, which scholars have shown to help undocumented students succeed at much higher rates than states that do not offer in-state tuition (Flores, 2010; Flores & Horn, 2009). On the other side of the spectrum are states like Alabama and South Carolina, which have enacted policies banning undocumented students from attending any public 2-year or 4-year institution.

Georgia is an interesting case in that it bans undocumented students from attending only its most competitive public institutions while charging out-of-state tuition rates at its remaining colleges and universities. To date, Georgia is the only state that prevents access to a select number of its institutions. The policy (BOR Policy 4.1.6, 2010) resides within the Board of Regents for the University System of Georgia (USG), although there have been multiple instances where the state legislature has attempted to intervene. The ban was enacted in 2010 following a set of complicated events that has shaped public policy regarding college access for undocumented students across Georgia.

A nonprofit organization was formed to help combat the ban, while also working to create college access opportunities for undocumented students. It began in Athens, Georgia, after faculty members at the University of Georgia (UGA) along with volunteers and community members created a place where undocumented students could gather, attend regularly held classes, and work to gain admission into a postsecondary institution. The space is called "Freedom University," an unaccredited school where 30+ students come together each week to further their dreams of earning a college degree. Commonly referred to as "Freedom U," the organization seeks to educate

undocumented students who are currently in high school as well as those who have recently graduated and are unable to attend college due to the Regents' ban or because of financial difficulty (Freedom University, 2016).

Freedom U has two primary objectives: (a) help undocumented students earn admission into a 2-year or 4-year postsecondary institution, and (b) protest BOR Policy 4.1.6 in an effort to have the ban lifted. Freedom U's first-year class (2011-2012) had an enrollment of 30 students, with four of those going on to successfully enroll in private colleges in Massachusetts and New York. In the years since, Freedom U has sent students to Berea College, Dartmouth College, Emory University, Hampshire College, Smith College, Syracuse University, Tougaloo College, Whitman College, and many other postsecondary institutions across the country. Freedom U has also worked closely with administrators, staff, and students at Emory University to create "Freedom at Emory," an advocacy group for undocumented students. This group was instrumental in working with Emory President James Wagner to create a privately funded, need-based financial aid program for undocumented students applying to Emory (Davis, 2015).

Although BOR Policy 4.1.6 created a climate of deterrence for students, Freedom U helped expose students to postsecondary opportunities, namely, by introducing students to a college-going climate/network and educating students on the types of schools that offer friendly admission policies to undocumented students. Through this type of work, numerous students have benefited from learning more about their college admission prospects, and many of them have been able to submit applications and successfully enroll in college (Soltis, 2015). Freedom U has also provided students with information regarding scholarship opportunities while also supporting students with funding/travel support for college visits.

The purpose of this study was to explore how Freedom U can influence questions of college access and college choice for undocumented students. Specifically, this study sought to determine how Freedom U helps students navigate the college search and application process. Furthermore, it addresses an identified gap in the literature by using a qualitative approach to explore how social capital influences the college choice and decision-making process for this target population. As such, our research questions include the following:

Research Question 1: How does Freedom University help students navigate the college choice process, resulting in increased levels of college access?

Research Question 2: How does Freedom University help to create social capital for students, and does this social capital expand their future college and life opportunities?

Research Question 3: How does Freedom University impact the types and availability of resources in the students' school and community context?

Literature Review

College access for undocumented students in the United States is an important policy issue, given that an estimated 65,000 to 80,000 undocumented youth graduate from high schools across the country each year (Drachman, 2006; Gonzales, 2009; Olivas, 2012; Passel, 2003; Pérez, 2009). Furthermore, college-going rates for undocumented students continue to lag behind permanent residents and U.S.-born residents (Passel & Cohn, 2009). There are no federal guidelines involving college admission for undocumented students and individual states are therefore left to determine their own admission policies. While some states such as Texas and California aim to increase access by offering in-state tuition for undocumented students, other states such as Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina have created policies to prohibit students from attending their postsecondary institutions (Soltis, 2015).

There is a substantial and mature body of literature exploring the process by which individuals decide to pursue postsecondary education. This vein of research, known as college choice, grew originally out of sociological and economic research, with recent research models combining the two concepts together (Paulsen, 1990). Some of the most well-known combined models of college choice were developed in the 1980s, and typically conceive of a pipeline in which students first develop an aspiration for higher education, next identify a set of potential institutions, and finally select a college or university to attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982). These studies were incredibly influential, having shaped research, policy, and practice for many years. However, they are limited in that they were built around a traditional college-going population and do not directly consider the additional barriers experienced by historically underrepresented populations.

Since then, a number of researchers have expanded the college choice model to account for race, socioeconomic status, cultural/family context, and so forth (Freeman, 1999; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2000, 2006; Perna & Titus, 2005; Pitre, 2006). Many studies have also examined the relationship between school-based counselors and college access, while also speaking to the role of social and cultural capital in influencing college choice (Belasco, 2013; Belasco & Trivette, 2015; Kane, 1999; Lee & Ekstrom, 1987; McDonough, 1997; National Association for College Admission Counseling [NACAC], 1986; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Sandefur, Meier, & Campbell, 2006).

McDonough (2005) indicated that high school counselors are often the persons in K-12 responsible for college access preparation and assistance; however, they are often inappropriately trained and structurally constrained from being able to fulfill this role in public high schools. The NACAC found that great disparities in college counseling resources and activities are often the direct result of the social class of the communities in which high schools are located (NACAC, 1986). Those who are especially disadvantaged in terms of inadequate counseling are communities, schools, and students of color (McDonough, 1997; Paul, 2002). Scholars found that African American and Latino students are significantly more likely to be influenced by their school-based counselors when it comes to their college preparation (Lee & Ekstrom, 1987; Plank & Jordan, 2001), but these students are often those least likely to have counselors, the most likely to have underprepared counselors, and the most likely to have counselors who are pulled away from college counseling-related work to devote time to other tasks (Paul, 2002).

While there is an established body of literature exploring college choice processes, research focusing on undocumented students and their college choice decision-making is limited. Recent studies focusing on undocumented students in U.S. higher education tend to concentrate on the political process of setting tuition policy within individual states (Dougherty, Nienhuser, & Vega, 2010; Reich & Mendoza, 2008), and various books, reports, and law articles provide a wealth of descriptive information intended to educate readers on legislation that impacts undocumented students, both at the state and federal levels (Biswas, 2005; Connolly, 2005; Drachman, 2006; Gonzales, 2007, 2009; Olivas, 2004, 2009, 2012; Salsbury, 2003). Other studies have analyzed how in-state tuition policies have given students a greater sense of social acceptance/identity (Abrego, 2008) while also increasing enrollment rates compared with students in states without in-state tuition (Flores, 2010).

Flores and Horn (2009) found that undocumented students persisted at rates similar to that of their Latino peers who are U.S. citizens and legal residents. Pérez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, and Cortes (2009) analyzed data from undocumented students at both the high school and postsecondary levels and found that those students who had higher levels of academic and environmental support (i.e., family, friends, school) generally experienced higher levels of academic success. Even for students who were determined to be "at risk" (i.e., elevated feelings of societal rejection, low parental education, high employment hours while in school), students who had higher levels of academic and environmental support tended to perform better while in school. Support seems to be key as many undocumented students grow up in what Gonzales (2011) referred to as a state of "suspended illegality" (p. 608), where they are often unaware of their lack of legal status or have yet to

experience its limitations. Only when they attempt to apply for jobs, acquire a driver's license, or begin the college application process do they learn that they lack the required materials to qualify (Allard, 2015).

As noted by Perna (2000) and Perna and Titus (2005), the concepts of cultural capital and social capital play a substantial role in college choice decisions for students from historically underrepresented background, including undocumented students. Social capital has also been applied to studies of graduate school choice, with both Perna (2004) and English and Umbach (2016) demonstrating that measures of social capital enhance understanding of enrollment decisions. Surprisingly, however, little attention has been given to the role that these types of capital play in creating college access for undocumented students. Until now, no study has analyzed how a community-based organization generates cultural and social capital for undocumented students. This study addresses this gap in the literature by explicitly exploring how a nonprofit community organization influenced the college choice process for students by enhancing their usable levels of capital.

Theoretical and Conceptual Model

This study employs the conceptual framework advanced by Perna (2006) in exploring college choice decisions (see Appendix). The model conceives of college choice as a nested process, with four discrete contextual layers influencing an individual's decision to pursue college. The outermost layer encompasses the social, economic, and policy context; the higher education context is next, inclusive of the recruitment activities taken by colleges and universities; and the school and community context considers the availability and types of resources made available to a student. All three of these layers directly influence the first layer, the habitus, in which a student's demographic characteristics and accumulated social capital and cultural capital inform and shape the human capital investment decision. This conceptual framework directly embeds the theories of human capital, cultural capital, and social capital in the consideration of college choice. This study seeks to explore how Freedom University influenced college access and college choice decisions for its participants by specifically examining the ways in which Freedom U helped to create social capital for students (Layer 1 of the model), and enhanced the set of resources made available to the participants in their school and community context (Layer 2).

While human capital theory does capture many of the monetary factors influencing college choice decisions, it has been shown to lack efficacy when used in isolation to examine these processes for historically underrepresented populations. McDonough (1997) was one of the first researchers to explicitly

consider the role that cultural capital and social capital play in influencing college choice decisions. She posited that a student's cultural and social capital will affect the level and quality of college education that a student intends to acquire; that a student's choice of college will make sense in the context of that student's friends, family, and outlook, or habitus; and that by using bounded rationality, students will limit the number of considered alternatives.

Perna (2006) included these concepts of cultural capital and social capital in her model of college choice. Included in Layer 1 (habitus) of her conceptual model, a student's accumulated cultural capital and social capital will directly influence and inform how the college choice decision is made. Bourdieu suggests that the amount and type of capital an individual possesses is a function of the habitus developed by virtue of the class the individual is born into (Ovink & Veazey, 2011). As a result, the elite or privileged sector possesses the capital necessary to remain at the upper echelons of society, while the underprivileged class is socialized in ways to limit their expectations and goals, which serves to prevent them from successfully navigating the institutions of the dominant class (Ovink & Veazey, 2011).

Unlike human capital, social capital exists within the structure of the relationships inside of the network. An individual has access to resources—real or potential—by virtue of the connections and relationships provided by their social network (Bourdieu, 1986). A person's position within the network determines the amount of social capital he or she has access to (Coleman, 1988). Therefore, social capital is not tangible but rather exists within those relationships. Social capital does, however, yield material outcomes. Individuals are able to draw upon social capital to find employment opportunities, acquire political assets, or generate economic returns (Lin, 2001a). A primary function of social capital is to enable a person or group to gain access to human, cultural, and other forms of capital, as well as institutional resources and support (Coleman, 1988; Hofferth, Boisjoly, & Duncan, 1998; Lin, 2001b; Morrow, 1999; Portes, 1998; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).

Coleman (1988) noted that social capital is used to facilitate the creation of human capital by giving persons the necessary information and tools needed to navigate our society and move up the career ladder. In the United States, this is most often achieved through our postsecondary education system, where individuals expect to gain both human capital and social capital by virtue of their college credentials (Perna & Titus, 2005). A postsecondary degree is essential to garner the skills necessary to compete for occupations as the nation continues to shift from an industrial economy to an information and technology-driven economy (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003).

The majority of undocumented students come from a socioeconomic background where the prospects of attending college are limited. These students

are significantly less likely to have sufficient access to the information, resources, and support needed to access and succeed in a postsecondary environment (Ceja, 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Whereas affluent students can use their primary source of social capital—the family unit—for information specific to higher education (Kim & Schneider, 2005), disadvantaged students—and specifically, undocumented students—do not have that same resource. Gonzales (2010) noted that the majority of undocumented students outpace their parents' levels of educational attainment and many are left without proper guidance concerning postsecondary opportunities, particularly those students whose parents never attended college. Combined with the fact that many undocumented students come from backgrounds where family poverty limits postsecondary matriculation (Gonzales, 2010), it quickly becomes apparent that various hurdles stand in the way of undocumented students being able to pursue higher education.

We conceptualize the activities and work taking place within Freedom University as having the potential to generate social capital for undocumented students, influencing their core college choice decisions reflected in Layer 1 of the conceptual model. We also posit that participation in Freedom University enhances the set of resources made available to the students in Layer 2 of the model, their school and community context. By gaining access or choosing to take part in activities and classes at Freedom University, students gain access to a network that derives social capital from faculty, fellow students, community members, volunteers, and other key actors. This social capital can then be used to help students navigate the college search and application process.

Background on BOR Policy 4.1.6

While immigration is a hotly contested topic in today's political environment, both at the state and national levels, it was not on the minds of higher education officials and state lawmakers in Georgia during the early part of the 21st century. However, one seemingly small incident set off a chain reaction of events that would have sweeping effects throughout the Georgia public higher education landscape. In early 2010, a student attending Kennesaw State University (KSU) was stopped by a university police officer for a minor traffic violation. Jessica Colotl, an undocumented immigrant, was unable to provide a valid driver's license and following her arrest, she was turned over to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to await deportation. Local community members, including fellow college students and the president of KSU, lobbied for her release and eventually ICE would allow Colotl to remain in the United States until she completed her senior year (Brown, 2010; Shahshahani & Washington, 2013).

The events at KSU, a public 4-year institution and a member of the USG, ignited a controversy that expanded well beyond its campus located just northwest of Atlanta. After Colotl's arrest, it was discovered that she had been paying the in-state tuition rate (Diamond, 2010). Upon Colotl's release from ICE, many people felt her return to KSU was indicative of failed measures to enforce U.S. immigration policies (Shahshahani & Washington, 2013). Others repeatedly argued that by Colotl being permitted to attend a public institution, the state was encouraging illegal immigration and allowing undocumented immigrants to take advantage of taxpayer-subsidized public education (Cook & Simmons, 2010). State politicians were vocal in putting pressure on the USG to limit access for undocumented students and some even called for banning them altogether (Cook & Simmons, 2010; Diamond, 2011).

To respond to the incident, the Board of Regents conducted a system-wide audit of all 35 state institutions to determine the number of undocumented students. The audit reported that 501 of the system's nearly 310,000 students (less than 0.2%) were undocumented at the beginning of the 2010-2011 academic year (Hebel, 2010), and all were paying the out-of-state tuition rates. The Regents also created the Residency Verification Committee to determine the impact of undocumented students on Georgia's public colleges and universities (Policy Center, 2010). The committee created a policy banning undocumented students from attending the state's most selective colleges and universities, and the policy was approved by the Regents in October of 2010.

BOR Policy 4.1.6 effectively bans undocumented students from attending Augusta University,² Georgia College, Georgia Institute of Technology, and the UGA. Undocumented students wishing to attend the state's 22 other public institutions³ must pay the out-of-state tuition rates. In the years following the passage of Policy 4.1.6, the state legislature has threatened to intervene with various house and senate bills designed to ban undocumented students from attending any of the state's public institutions. Former USG Chancellor, Hank Huckaby, spoke out against the proposed bills and successfully lobbied for the policy to remain within the jurisdiction of the USG Board of Regents.

While Policy 4.1.6 continues to be current policy within the USG, several local challenges have been brought forth to argue for in-state tuition benefits for DACA recipients.⁴ Atlanta immigration attorney Charles Kuck argued that DACA recipients are considered "lawfully present" under U.S. federal law as a result of former President Obama's executive order in 2012. After hearing the case in December 2016, a judge in Fulton County ruled in favor of providing DACA recipients with in-state tuition. The Board of Regents filed an appeal and the Georgia Court of Appeals granted a stay on January 13, 2017, while they determine the final outcome of the case.

About Freedom University

The initial group of faculty members that helped to create Freedom University came from the UGA. The four faculty members who were most instrumental in creating Freedom U represented two departments on campus: Romance Languages and History. Two of the four faculty members were also immigrants, and as Sofia mentions, being involved in Freedom U was a personal calling as she desperately wanted other immigrant students in her classroom:

I felt horrible, because I saw these kids are out there, and I'm here in my office not doing anything, and I have—I'm also an immigrant, but I'm a professor. And I have all these privileges. And I'm not using them. So that was something that got me very annoyed. I was reading the news and seeing this happening, and feeling that I was not doing anything productive. I felt I needed either to quit my job or do something.

The faculty members connected with local groups like the Athens Latino Center for Education and Services (ALCES) and utilized the support from local volunteers, activists, and UGA students to launch Freedom University in 2011. ALCES provided a space for meeting on Sunday afternoons, and Freedom U used this facility, along with the public library, for almost 3 years before relocating to Atlanta.

Today, Freedom U offers tuition-free education that provides leadership development, public engagement opportunities, and skills related to building social movements as a way to empower a new generation of undocumented youth leaders. Courses are taught by volunteer faculty who are employed as full-time faculty at nearby institutions, including Emory University, Georgia Institute of Technology, Georgia State University, Morehouse College, and the University of North Georgia. Course titles include "U.S. Government," "General Chemistry," "Border Studies: Immigration, Identity, and the Undocumented Student Movement," "Poetry and Creative Writing," and "College Algebra," among others. Previous courses have also included classes devoted to prepping for standardized tests and learning how to write compelling admissions essays, both of which can help a student improve his or her odds of both admission and obtaining merit aid. There are also discussions and presentations centered around helping students locate scholarships and funding opportunities. Freedom U also provides limited scholarship support for students attending postsecondary institutions as well as travel and funding support for college visits. The work through Freedom U is sustained through grant support and by private donations from people and organizations across the globe. Freedom U also led to a spin-off organization called U-Lead Athens that actively helps undocumented students as well as

low-income or first-generation college students through the college search and application process. In states where access for undocumented students is limited, organizations like Freedom U and U-Lead Athens may be able to assist students in finding freedom to pursue their academic and career goals.

Freedom U is a unique program that has garnered scholarly attention in recent years. Garcia-Pena (2012) and Voekel (2016) were two of the founding faculty members of Freedom U, and they present an overview of the social and political environment that surrounded its creation. Garcia-Pena (2012) discussed the incredible community that was developed out of its time in Athens, and the ways that students, faculty, and community members seamlessly moved between academic, social, and emotional support. Soltis (2015) explored the deep, meaningful, and purposeful connections that Freedom U shares with the Freedom School movement of the 1960s. She further examines the impact that Freedom U has in establishing a supportive and liberating educational community for impacted students.

Muñoz, Espino, and Antrop-Gonzalez (2014) conducted a qualitative study exploring the impact that participation in Freedom U had on the faculty engaged in the program. While the study was focused on the faculty involved in the founding of Freedom U, it does discuss the concept that students share certain life experiences. Those shared life experiences yield certain similarities in how the students interact with the course material and the program itself. Shahshahani and Washington (2013) examined Freedom U and the attendant BOR policies from a legal framework, exploring those policies from both a United States Constitutional perspective but also from an international human rights law approach. Their analysis indicates that the BOR policies were incompatible with the Equal Protection Clause of the United States Constitution, and should thus be struck down. They are also of the opinion that the BOR policies fail to meet the standards of customary human rights principles, including the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Data and Methods

The goal of our study was to gain a deeper understanding of how Freedom University works to create postsecondary opportunities for undocumented students. By focusing on the students, faculty, and volunteers within Freedom U, we were able to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that influence students during the college search and application process. This study relies on a qualitative methodology to answer the aforementioned research questions.

A qualitative approach facilitates understanding of how individuals ascribe meaning to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2009), and allows the researcher to acquire deeper understanding into the antecedents and impacts of a social dilemma (Merriam, 1998). From this perspective, our study provides a unique viewpoint of the complex relationship between immigration status and postsecondary transition, and illuminates how organizations like Freedom U may offer undocumented students a path to higher education that is rarely achieved.

The study employs a qualitative interview design combined with a critical research approach (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015) as critical research not only seeks to study and understand society, but it also works to critique and change society (Patton, 2002). Freedom University provided the perfect opportunity to employ qualitative research through this critical research lens, and by analyzing data from interviews, we seek to explain how Freedom University facilitates high school to college transition and how it influences college access for undocumented students.

Gaining Access to Freedom University

Gaining initial access to Freedom University was one of the greatest challenges. Due to their immigration status, undocumented students are often unwilling to speak to those outside of their network of family and friends, especially those in which they have no prior relationship. Students enrolled in Freedom University may be hesitant to talk to people outside of the organization for fear that their immigration status may be revealed to outside parties or governmental agencies such as ICE. Faculty members at Freedom University are also skeptical of outsiders, unless those individuals have been properly vetted by someone within Freedom U. There is a sense that faculty and volunteers want to do everything possible to protect the students and provide a safe space for them to assemble.

One of the authors was able to gain access to Freedom University as a result of a prior working relationship with a gatekeeper. In this type of study, gatekeepers are beneficial in that they assist researchers with gaining access and developing trust within a group or community (Hatch, 2002). Gatekeepers are instrumental for researchers in being able to gain access to an individual or group that may otherwise be unable or unwilling to converse with outside members. Our gatekeeper allowed the author to have access to Freedom University, and also introduced him to the faculty and students. The gatekeeper was instrumental in the creation of Freedom U and is highly respected by both its faculty and students. If this individual approves of someone from outside of Freedom U, it is more likely that both students and faculty/staff will speak to that person because of the gatekeeper's approval. The gatekeeper in

our study was assigned a pseudonym—Susan—to protect confidentiality. Although this individual was instrumental in our introduction to Freedom University, Susan was not present while we conducted each interview.

Sample Selection

In November 2013, we attended a class session in Athens, Georgia, and disseminated a recruitment letter for interview subjects. Several students agreed to participate in the study, and snowball sampling was used through the course of conducting interviews to identify other potential subjects (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Criterion sampling was also used to locate former students who are/were enrolled in postsecondary institutions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This relied both on knowledge of former students as well as recommendations from students and faculty. We interviewed 13 current students of Freedom U and seven former students who have gone on to successfully enroll in college. We also interviewed two former faculty members and one current faculty member who presently serves as the executive director of the organization. Our interview data also included three volunteers who were instrumental in various aspects of Freedom U.

Study participants were identified based on their role within Freedom University. This study collected data from three primary groups: (a) current and former students of Freedom U; (b) current and former faculty of Freedom U; and (c) current and former volunteers of Freedom U. Our primary focus was on interviewing undocumented students who were currently attending Freedom University and former students who were enrolled in college. Students must have been older than 18 years of age to be included in the study. Interviewing both current and former students provided the widest sample of interview data. Study participants were identified based on existing relationships within the organization and based on others whom these participants recommended as potential interview subjects. Each undocumented student received a study recruitment letter during a class session and students who volunteered to participate in the study received the consent form before participating. The Institutional Review Board at the UGA granted the right to waive documented consent in an effort to protect the confidentiality of the study's participants as a result of undocumented students being considered an at-risk or vulnerable population.

Interviews

Interviews are typically one of the most important sources of information when using a qualitative approach (Yin, 2009), and they were used to learn

more about the experiences of participants within Freedom University. The interviews were focused (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990) with each interview having a set of predetermined questions that lasted between 20 minutes and 2 hours in length. All interviews were conducted in person in a semistructured format that allowed for us to ask follow-up questions. Each interview was also audio-recorded with two separate recorders, and written interview notes were also collected to ensure consistency while transcribing the interview data. Each study participant was prompted for their affirmative consent to participate in the study. They could have also elected to not answer a question if he or she felt uncomfortable. The participant could also choose to withdraw from the study at any point in time.

Due to that fact that undocumented students are considered to be an at-risk/vulnerable population, each study participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity and confidentiality. All findings, written reports, and other records used pseudonyms to protect the identities of each participant. Interview protocols varied according to the participants. For example, undocumented students still enrolled within Freedom University received questions that differed from their undocumented peers who were previously enrolled in Freedom University and have subsequently enrolled in a postsecondary institution. Similarly, questions for faculty members of Freedom U are different from the types of questions posed to students. Similar variations exist for volunteers who were interviewed for the study. Interview protocols were used for each of the following: current Freedom U students; former Freedom U students now enrolled in postsecondary institutions; faculty members of Freedom U; and volunteers of Freedom U. Access to all interview data was limited to the research team. See Table 1 for the data on study participants.

Data Analysis

Our data analysis began shortly after collecting the interview data. We used preexisting codes to guide the coding process (Creswell, 2007). These codes helped shape some of our interview questions, and the preexisting codes consisted of several open codes (i.e., “college access” and “activism”) that we grouped into larger categories through axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) or analytical coding (Merriam, 2009). This deductive approach allowed us to have a set of predefined codes based on prior research and studies analyzing college access. In addition, we looked for emerging themes throughout the coding process and over the course of transcribing and analyzing all interviews. Combining an inductive and

Table 1. Study Participants.

Pseudonym	Role	Gender	Age	Years in Georgia
Victor	Current student	Male	20	14
Leo	Current student	Male	23	23
Jesse	Current student	Male	18	16
Pablo	Current student	Male	19	15
Carolina	Current student	Female	20	13
Rose	Current student	Female	21	21
Emma	Current student	Female	21	11
Olivia	Current student	Female	27	24
Julia	Current student	Female	19	17
Diego	Current student	Male	20	17
David	Current student	Male	20	16
Anna	Current student	Female	22	13
Devon	Current student	Female	18	14
Paula	Former student	Female	24	18
Eva	Former student	Female	21	16
Javier	Former student	Male	25	16
Maria	Former student	Female	23	16
Marco	Former student	Male	22	6
Sara	Former student	Female	21	14
Oscar	Former student	Male	20	18
Eleanor	Faculty	Female	—	—
Sofia	Faculty	Female	—	—
Violeta	Faculty	Female	—	—
Vicki	Faculty	Female	—	—
Wendy	Faculty	Female	—	—
Lucia	Faculty	Female	—	—
Susan	Volunteer/Organizer	Female	25	—
Brenda	Volunteer/Faculty	Female	—	—
Maxwell	Volunteer	Male	—	—

deductive coding structure allowed us to gather the most complete information about the experiences of our study's participants. It also afforded us the opportunity to draw conclusions that support previous work involving college access while allowing us to uncover results that have not been cited in previous literature. Data were coded and analyzed using NVivo qualitative software to look for emerging themes (Merriam, 2009) that developed over the course of conducting interviews.

Limitations

One of the main limitations of this study is that its findings are limited to these particular students at this particular time in Georgia. By using qualitative methods, we may be sacrificing breadth for depth, and what may be lost in generalizability may be gained by an in-depth look into the participants featured in this study. While every state has varying policies concerning admission to postsecondary institutions for undocumented students, we can safely assume that there are a number of undocumented students in various states who experience similar challenges posed to those students here in Georgia. It is our hope that the lessons learned from this study may be applicable in other areas of the country where there may be high concentrations of undocumented students facing insurmountable odds of being able to access higher education.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how Freedom University impacted issues of college access and college choice for undocumented students. We specifically sought to explore how participation in Freedom U enhanced the level of resources available in the students' school and community context, and how increased levels of social capital impacted college choice. Our findings are presented in alignment with the three guiding research questions: first, a discussion of how Freedom University impacted college access and college choice; next, how Freedom U helped build social capital in support of college access; and last, how Freedom University enhanced the participants' school and community context.

Within each section the data are further separated into major themes, each having emerged from the data as being central to the work at Freedom University. Within the first research question regarding college choice, the two themes are *Creating College Access* and *Activism Affecting College Applications*. The major themes associated with the development of social capital are *Inspiring Hope* and *Creating Connections*. A major theme surrounding the *Impact of College Counseling* developed within the research question regarding the school and community context.

Creating College Access

Freedom University initially set out to repeal Policy 4.1.6 as a way to help create access for undocumented students. As this outcome looked increasingly difficult, most of the work at Freedom U turned to helping students find

colleges that offered both admission and financial aid. A substantial challenge for many of these students was the fact that they had given up on the idea of attending college early in their high school careers. Due to Policy 4.1.6, many students lost motivation inside of the classroom. Out-of-state costs were a significant deterrent, and students did not qualify for state or federal aid. Many students failed to push themselves to achieve high grades and test scores once they perceived their chances of attending college to be slim. Susan, a volunteer at Freedom University, witnessed this take place on a regular basis:

Even the brightest students who should have been super successful in applying to colleges and easily admitted, they were usually the ones that had the most atrocious SAT scores, just because they hit their senior year and they didn't care. Like they knew they couldn't get into a state school or couldn't afford a state school, and it was just kind of off the table. So they took the SATs probably because they felt like they had to or like, "oh well, everybody else is doing it so I probably should," or their counselors were kind of pushing them to do it.

Javier, a high-achieving student with a 1300+ SAT score, also noticed fellow students who lost hope of attending college and did not take standardized tests as a result: "I know many people in Freedom U never took SAT tests because they're like, 'well, I'm not going to be able to go to college anyway, like why even bother?'"

Many students felt defeated during high school. Most were early in their high school career when the ban was handed down from the Board of Regents, and as a result, many lost motivation to perform at a high level inside the classroom. Students like Rose were the ones who found it difficult to stay motivated while in high school. Undoubtedly, she was depressed about her college prospects and high school counselors lacked the knowledge to be able to help students in her situation:

It wasn't until my senior year I was like, I could have tried hard. But I just lacked motivation my freshman and my sophomore year and junior year. My counselors couldn't really help me out. They just didn't have an answer or anything for me, so it just unmotivated me so much more. It was just some situation where they didn't know what to do and how to guide me, so it was hard.

Freedom University stepped in to fill this void, and was able to help students navigate the complicated world of college admissions. Faculty, staff

and volunteers regularly held group discussions and presentations highlighting college admissions information that students needed to know, such as what admissions committees valued in the college application and what colleges typically want to see in a student's portfolio. Students also received one-on-one conversations centered on college admissions, and for many of them it was the first time they had received that type of one-on-one college counseling focusing on the essential elements of the college application process. Students learned from one another as they shared information with their fellow peers, and as Sofia points out, students began to believe in themselves and what they were capable of accomplishing:

Freedom University did a lot to get kids in college. Not only because of these behind the scenes conversations, but because this—Well, the kids started believing that they could make it. They started seeing kids that were making it, and kids who were not that different from themselves, and I think that was the key piece. They didn't give up.

As Sofia mentioned, several students from the first Freedom U cohort successfully gained admission and enrolled in 4-year institutions such as Syracuse University and Hampshire College. Eleanor commented on how important it was to be able to train students and give them the kind of necessary skills needed for the college application process:

I think that it particularly gives them the kind of knowledge [and] soft skills that they need to understand the application process and to complete it on time . . . it gives them some assertiveness training and gets rid of some of the mystery of what is needed to apply, that people in middle class backgrounds with parents who have gone to college just have. And I think it encouraged people and gave them hope and gave them a sense of support.

Creating this environment was crucial in being able to foster an atmosphere where students possessed the confidence in their abilities to earn admission and succeed on a college campus. If anything, the faculty at Freedom U were insistent upon teaching students that they *belonged* with their peers in college and were equally deserving:

I think by helping them see that they absolutely belong in college classrooms, by preparing them—I know a lot of the students have said the discussion-based classes help build their confidence that they can participate in that sort of thing. I think seeing adults volunteer their time shows that it isn't a nation full of people who hate them and discriminate against them, and that it includes people who feel exactly the opposite and are willing to give their time for that. (Brenda)

Current and former students realized the importance of faculty and peers creating an environment that gave them access to a network and resources that they otherwise would not have had:

I think it's sort of really nice to be able to have a network or to have access to different people who, A, understand the importance of education, and two, are also really knowledgeable about the way that the system works in the U.S. Not all of us have the privilege of sort of growing up with parents who understand the process, and so I think for a lot of us, it is entirely up to ourselves to get through all that, and it was nice to have that support . . . It was just nice to be able to approach Susan or whoever and say, "what do you think about this?" or "is this legit?" or "do you think I have a chance here?" I think just having that access to everybody and developing those friendships and those connections . . . I think this is just kind of necessary. (Sara)

Victor viewed Freedom University's role as being able to help students like himself reach higher education:

I liked it just because it gave me a place to go to seek higher education, because that's what it was for, to seek higher education because we can't do that here at UGA . . . It was good. It was kind of weird, because it's like they're teaching you college stuff, and so when I did go it was like, "wow!"

Julia's comments echoed that of Victor as she highlighted the importance of continuing her education:

I think the overall goal is to get into college, but I think also a big part of it is to stay current in your education, because it's really hard to, I guess, go into college and have years passed without you learning anything, so it's really helpful to still be learning while trying to get into college.

In keeping with the idea of providing higher education, students like Leo felt that it was more about giving education to those who are unable to receive it due to policies that limit college access:

I think the main purpose would be to provide an education to those who are unable to receive an education due to policies here in Georgia, and I just kind of see them [Freedom University] being there for students who aren't able to move ahead or be there.

It is important to point out that for students like Leo, Freedom University was an organization that was willing to step up and provide education for

students who were disenfranchised by the State and the Board of Regents. Oscar elaborated on this point by describing Freedom University as:

Sort of like the bridge way to connect the DACA students or undocumented students to other universities and college work, because they're not allowed to go to college in Georgia or even afford it . . . sort of like that bridge-way towards the higher education.

Activism Affecting College Applications

Another theme that became apparent through the interviews was the idea of activism and advocacy work having an impact on students' college applications and admission prospects. By virtue of their involvement with Freedom University, numerous students participated in protests and activism work related to speaking out against BOR Policy 4.1.6 and various Georgia House and Senate bills. As a result of their civic engagement, many elected to write about their participation in their college essays and/or stress their involvement in other areas of the college application, such as portfolios, student activities resumes, and so forth. In addition, Freedom U faculty members often wrote about these student leaders in the recommendation letters they submitted to students' prospective colleges. When discussing whether they viewed activism having the potential to affect their odds of admission, many of the current students at Freedom University saw it as a positive addition to their applications. Students like Jesse felt empowered by his activism work and the confidence he gained from participating:

Going to those protests really empowered me. It made me feel confident and being just, you know, undocumented. But it didn't make me feel ashamed any more about it, you know? It's who I am . . . that's who I am, and it's a very political thing at one point . . . It's helped motivate me. It really helped me out, and for a very activist oriented, grassroots type of college that seeks leadership and stuff, social leadership, then yeah, I mean that could work for like a point in a resume, you know?

Daniela also felt that colleges valued civic engagement and she thought it was important to be involved in her local community:

Colleges really like to see that you're proactive in your community and what are you doing about your issues instead of just sitting around like hoping someone else does something. Like, you're passionate about learning and stuff like that.

While not yet enrolled in college, David felt his activism work would have a positive influence on his college applications:

Some colleges will look at it as a plus, as how he sticks up for what he believes in and fights for what he's passionate about.

Former students felt their involvement with activist work played an integral role in their college applications. Most students viewed their participation as having played a significant part in their personal stories and felt it was another way to distinguish themselves from the rest of the applicant pool. They also generally felt their advocacy work was a positive experience for their personal growth and development. Javier commented on his activism work being something that would set him apart from the rest of a college's applicants:

I feel like you're playing almost on a level field when you apply to college, like mostly everybody has really good grades, so a lot of that stuff, they kind of like expect it for people, and what really filters out people is like, your involvement with your community or what you're seeking was definitely a boost.

Paula was another former student who really felt empowered through her previous activism work and used her personal experiences to write compelling essays for each of her college applications:

I don't think it kind of altered like the places that I wanted to go to . . . but I think at the end of the day the [protest] rallies gave me this sense of power of like I can do this, and I have a voice, and I need to use it. I guess it gave me the confidence that I didn't have, but it also was really influential in my essays, kind of fighting this power kind of opened up this, I guess, other side of me that I didn't know, and I used it a lot in my essays.

Faculty members also realized the importance of activism and how students grew as individuals through their participation. More than one faculty member discussed how Freedom University was creating leaders and agents of change. We were also able to directly witness when students like Daniela, who was shy and introverted in high school, would turn around and be some of the most vocal leaders at Freedom U, participating in multiple speaking events before the State Senate and Board of Regents. Sofia commented on how these moments of action changed students' lives:

I think it has a strong impact in their personalities. I think they find that they do not need to be in the shadows, and there's something they can do. They come

from a background in which they are told not to say anything, and to be in the shadows, and this for them is like taking their destiny in their own hands. It's empowering, and I've seen it. It's amazing. You see one day one kid who is so shy, who is not willing to share anything, and you can tell he's suffering, and then you see this blooming person with so many things to say and to do, and getting into college . . . I think it's something that they, in whatever degree they can, they need to participate in the protest and be part of the movement that changes their life story.

Inspiring Hope

Another theme that quickly began to emerge within the data was the idea of Freedom University being a place to inspire hope. We heard the word "hope" from a majority of the students we interviewed and we felt it was a fitting tribute to the role that Freedom University played in their lives. Being in Georgia, there's also a bit of irony associated with "hope," given how the majority of college-bound high school students in Georgia attribute meaning to the word. However, students at Freedom University are not eligible to receive the HOPE⁵ scholarship, even if their grades and test scores are sufficient. Undocumented students are prevented from receiving this award due to their residency status. "Hope" for students at Freedom U takes on a completely different meaning, and its symbolism has been very powerful for many students. Jesse commented that Freedom U was a place providing "love, community, strength . . . yeah, power. Hope, definitely." Maria witnessed the value in hope and the change that Freedom University attempted to make for both her and her fellow students:

Hope. It means change. It means opportunity, and it means that no matter how horrible our lives have been, it will change and it will get better. Not to quote the get better slogan, but they [Freedom University] will do their hardest to make sure that you get in somewhere and that you have the best opportunity you can, and they have definitely changed my life.

Freedom University opened students' eyes to opportunities and dreams beyond anything many of them even imagined for themselves. Anna went from feeling destined to work in a chicken processing plant her entire life to now thinking about a better future and wanting to reach for something more:

For me, I think it's giving people hope, knowing there's doors we can open, knowing there's something we can do. They open doors for you. They give you hope. That's what they gave me, because before I didn't have any hope of going to school or whatever. They gave me a dream of going to school. Because before

I know I was thinking “I have no dreams. I want to go to school. I know I cannot do that.” So, it was like I thought I was going to be working in the factory for my whole life, and now I now have a future. I can do something better than that.

Hope allowed Maria to begin her college career over two years ago. She attends a selective liberal arts college in the Pacific Northwest and receives a full scholarship plus a stipend. Jesse was admitted into a private Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in the south and also received a full financial aid package to cover his cost of attendance. Anna hopes to be able to one day attend a college near her home to stay close to her mother. Perhaps Emma said it best when she described what Freedom University meant to her:

I would see Freedom University as a beacon of hope, you know? I feel like I felt very welcome when I went in there, and I learned some stuff. I’ve learned many things about art, and sciences, experiments . . . For me, I see it as a very welcoming place and very friendly, and like I said, a beacon of hope.

Creating Connections

One of the more interesting aspects of students attending Freedom U is the fact that students do not receive any type of academic credits that are transferable to accredited 2-year or 4-year institutions. Each week numerous students voluntarily attended classes to better their own lives while also helping their peers. David was drawn to the fact that faculty were donating their time to benefit students, as evidenced by former students attending college:

I chose to be involved with it because they were willing to teach outside of their classroom for free on a Sunday, which not many people do anything for free anymore, and hearing how many people they helped go to college and how they just motivated them to go to college and had them at all these crazy colleges that . . . I didn’t even hear of or even dreamt of going. I think that’s what motivated me to come back, and just the people—Everybody is so great and friendly to you.

A common thread through almost all of the interviews was this idea of building community within Freedom U. It was something that we noticed and felt from our earliest interactions and visits to the space, and it was something that was very organic. Undocumented students have a shared experience that few people in our society can relate to, but these students were able to use that common background to build a close-knit community designed to help one another succeed. Each person, in various ways, described the familial aspects of Freedom U. Leo described it as

one big family, because I have literally build my connections and know more people, and know people who are in my spot and in my shoes, and who kind of have almost the same struggles . . . and just another friend you can talk to.

Olivia also described this sense of community:

I used to think that they were just all about school, and I think they are for the most part just trying to get you in school and keep you educated, but I think as I went more, I realized . . . community is a big part of it, for you to feel like you belong somewhere, because a lot of times, or at least for me, I grew up with most of my friends or all of my friends [that] are not in the situation I am. They're all college graduates. They didn't have to go through what I went through, so they understand of course, and they tell me, "I understand your situation," but they haven't lived it. So, I think that Freedom U does provide that space for people to just feel like someone else understands them and has been in the situation.

But besides the atmosphere that Freedom U was cultivating within its walls, some students viewed Freedom U as their only chance at something more. One of the most powerful quotes came from a former student who went on to enroll in a selective liberal arts school in the Pacific Northwest. After being depressed about her situation, Maria viewed Freedom U as the way to a better opportunity:

There was nothing else in my life—I mean I'm going to be completely honest, I wasn't doing [Georgia] Perimeter anymore. I was babysitting because I couldn't work legally. I was going through a very rough time personally, and it was like, you have to do something, and you might as well . . . you need to do this, because there's nothing else, and this can lead to something better, because anything is better at this point and you're going to be with people who are going through the same thing as you are, something that I had never really gone through, [something] I never really had. Even through high school there weren't a lot of Hispanic kids in my classes. I was always the token Hispanic girl, so it was like you're going to have this whole class of people who are going through exactly the same thing you are going through. They're going to know what you're going through, so you don't have to explain anything. You don't have to give some weird answers as to why you can't drive or why you can't do this, or why you're not going to school, and it was just very refreshing, and I knew it was going to be amazing, and I knew that it was this opportunity to grow and become this better person even if I didn't get into colleges. I mean, I knew that Freedom U could lead me to colleges, just because the prior class, a couple of them had gone on to Syracuse, so I knew that that was an option . . . That's why my dad told me to go, because he knew that they could help me, but I personally went because they were these people who knew exactly what I

was going through, and I didn't have to hide anything. And they could lead me to something better.

While this study captured many powerful statements from students, faculty, and volunteers, Maria's statement was one that truly revealed the gravity of this topic and what these students are forced to overcome on a daily basis.

Impact of College Counseling

The importance of high school counseling was also a major theme of the research. Through the interview process, we learned more about what students were facing in terms of the level of support and college counseling they were able to receive in high school.

Many of the former and current students of Freedom University noted that they often had high school counselors who were not knowledgeable about their undocumented status and how their legal status could possibly impact their college admissions prospects.

Almost every student in Freedom University comes from a family background with little to no college background or knowledge. Without the luxury of having parents or siblings who have attended and graduated from a post-secondary institution, these students are often at the mercy of whatever resources they have access to while in high school. Pablo commented on the problem many undocumented students in his community face during their high school career:

Most Latino parents don't know anything and it's up to us to find out, the whole process, the due dates, the SATs, how important your classes are in your final senior year.

With little to no support inside their homes, students were simply left with the support and resources they had through their high schools. If the high school resources were limited, students faced the college application process alone and limited information meant that many students struggled to know how to properly manage their college applications:

I just knew [I needed] to pass the class to graduate. I didn't have any hopes of going to college. I didn't know what a GPA was. I didn't know how important the SAT was. I didn't know what a college application was going to look like, or the fact that it's like 12 things you've got to get for one application, so it was just not having that. So people that have had like a parent go to college, I think

it's a little bit easier, because you know they can mentor them. They can help them out. This, I had to go at this alone basically. (Jesse)

Discussion

This study helps address a number of gaps that have been highlighted in the literature regarding college access for historically underrepresented populations. The use of a qualitative methodology helped to elucidate more nuanced information about a population of students than has previously been made possible. Furthermore, the study explored the ways in which undocumented students interact with the college choice process. In addition, this study examined how social capital can influence college choice processes and the ways that a nonprofit organization can augment the set of resources available in a student's school and community context.

College Access and Choice

The findings of this study contribute to the body of literature surrounding college choice decisions and college access. It contributes to the established body of literature by exploring how undocumented students consider college options and navigate the search and application process. Similar to the findings of Freeman (1999) and McDonough (1997), the Freedom University students followed many of the standard sequential steps in the college choice process. Also in alignment with their findings was the fact that these students were significantly impacted by their cultural context, their socioeconomic status, and the quantity and quality of resources that surrounded them.

An important contribution to the literature pertains to the ways in which many of these Freedom University students believed that they had no path forward in college as a result of BOR Policy 4.1.6. The number of students who commented that they did not pursue a rigorous academic schedule or take commonly required standardized admissions tests is of deep concern, as it almost certainly ensures they will have incredibly limited postsecondary options, particularly at the 4-year level with respect to both admission and merit-aid opportunities. While concepts of aspiration and expectation have been documented in the literature previously, the extent to which many of these students believed they had no path forward is disheartening. The impact that Freedom University had in helping these students realize that they had both options and opportunities is of critical importance to both the continued refinement of the literature, and to the design of practical intervention and support programs.

We believe that earlier interventions may be of great benefit to this population, especially if students are made aware of their opportunities before reaching high school. If rising high school freshmen know they have the potential to be able to earn college admission, it seems plausible to expect that these students may work harder to reach their goals of attending college as a result. Outreach to students who lack documented status should begin in the middle school years, at the latest, to help provide information, support, and knowledge of the opportunities available.

The findings related to activism and college applications are also of importance to the literature. Freeman (1999) noted that internal pressures for achievement were a significant driver of college choice for African American students. The internal drive that the Freedom University students developed through their activism echoes and amplifies Freeman's (1999) findings. The internal passion and commitment that developed out of engaged activism resulted in more engaged and competitive college applications.

Social Capital

The conceptual framework used in this study was developed by Perna (2006) for analysis of college choice decisions. In her conceptualization, social capital plays a critical role in shaping college enrollment decisions by providing access to information about college and assistance with college processes. The results of this study indicate that social capital can be a very powerful resource for helping undocumented students in organizations such as Freedom University. Freedom U provides students with access to information and resources that they otherwise may not have access to, and this reaffirms the importance of social capital as outlined by Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and Lin (2001a, 2001b).

Perna (2006) noted that the primary transmitters of information about college opportunity are a student's parents, peers, and school officials. For undocumented students, these resources are often limited in that their parents do not typically have a college education, their peers do not have high expectations of their college opportunities, and their school officials may not be aware of how best to advise them. Freedom U fosters social capital for these students by providing a climate of positive expectations and aspirations. The volunteers and faculty at Freedom U also hold substantial information and knowledge about the college process and are able to provide those resources to the students. The peer network of participants in Freedom U further enhances these resources, as former and current students are able to share information and expectations.

The resources acquired by Freedom U's students are then used for purposive actions (Lin, 2001b) related to the college application process. By developing relationships among peers, faculty, volunteers, and personnel within college admission offices, students are able to tap into a network that provides social capital used for navigating the college search and application process.

It seems likely that many of the students who have successfully enrolled in college may not have been able to do so without the assistance of Freedom U, and many of the students currently attending Freedom U would most likely not be working toward reaching postsecondary education without having witnessed former students successfully make the transition. This study found that participation in Freedom U is associated with aspiration for higher education, which supports prior research related to peers transmitting necessary social capital (Perna, 2006), and that students are more likely to plan on attending a 4-year institution (González, Stone, & Jovel, 2003) and enroll (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Perna & Titus, 2005) if their friends also plan to attend college. This study further addresses concerns that have been raised regarding the limitations of quantitative methods in studying the impact of social capital on college choices processes. Perna (2004) and English and Umbach (2016) noted in their quantitative analyses of choice decisions that the large federal data sets often used in education policy research are limited by their lack of strong measures of cultural and social capital. This study addresses those concerns by employing a qualitative approach that allows for a more detailed analysis of the ways in which social capital help develop and influence college choice decisions.

Social and Community Context

This study also contributes to the literature on college choice by addressing the role that nonprofit organizations can play in enhancing college opportunities. Perna (2006) identified the important role that a student's school and community context can have in facilitating or inhibiting college choice. It was clear that college counseling in high schools did not exist for many of these students. Freedom University attempted to fill this void by providing a college-going climate for its students. It did so by offering each of the elements identified by McDonough (1997) as having a positive influence on college attendance, including a college preparatory curriculum; a college culture that sets high academic standards and includes networks that promote and support college expectations; a staff committed to helping students reach their goals; and resources devoted to counseling and advising college-bound students.

These findings also support prior work by Pérez et al. (2009). Their analysis of undocumented students' experiences found that increased levels of academic and environmental support are associated with better school performance. This also helps support Perna's (2006) concept of the school and community context directly influencing the individual college choice decisions made by students. These findings also inform ways in which other nonprofit community and college access organizations, such as GEAR UP, College Advising Corps, and others can seek to support populations of undocumented students. Given the often limited resources available to undocumented students, the importance of informed and engaged community organizations is paramount.

An example of how the model implemented by Freedom University can be replicated has already developed in Georgia. When Freedom University relocated from Athens to Atlanta in 2014, a spin-off organization was formed to help those in need. U-Lead Athens was created in 2014 to continue the legacy and work of Freedom U, and many of the Freedom U organizers and volunteers were instrumental in the successful launch of U-Lead Athens. The organization differs in the fact that it is open to not only undocumented students, but all students, and this includes first-generation, low-income, and U.S. citizens.

It is not uncommon for U-Lead Athens to have well over 50 students combined with 15 to 20 mentors and tutors each Thursday night when they meet at their designated weekly location. The work between students and mentors/tutors has not gone unnoticed. In the past year alone, students in U-Lead Athens have earned full 4-year scholarships to Agnes Scott College, Christian Brothers University, Delaware State University, Denison University, Stetson University, Eastern Connecticut State University, and Emory University, among others. Past students have attended Dartmouth College, Tufts University, and other highly selective institutions. Students have also earned admission into colleges across Georgia, including Georgia College, Georgia Southern University, Kennesaw State University, Piedmont College, University of Georgia, University of North Georgia, Young Harris College, and more. U-Lead Athens awarded over \$127,000 in scholarships to 39 students for the 2017-2018 academic year and in almost every case, the U-Lead scholarship made the difference in allowing these students to attend college.

Conclusion

Freedom University has sought to make a positive impact in the lives of students who face incredible challenges on a daily basis. By providing a space of positivity, affirmation, support, and optimism, Freedom University has

helped incredibly talented individuals realize the full breadth of their potential. While Freedom University has made an indelible impact on the lives of undocumented students in Georgia, it clearly does not ameliorate the enormous challenges faced by this population.

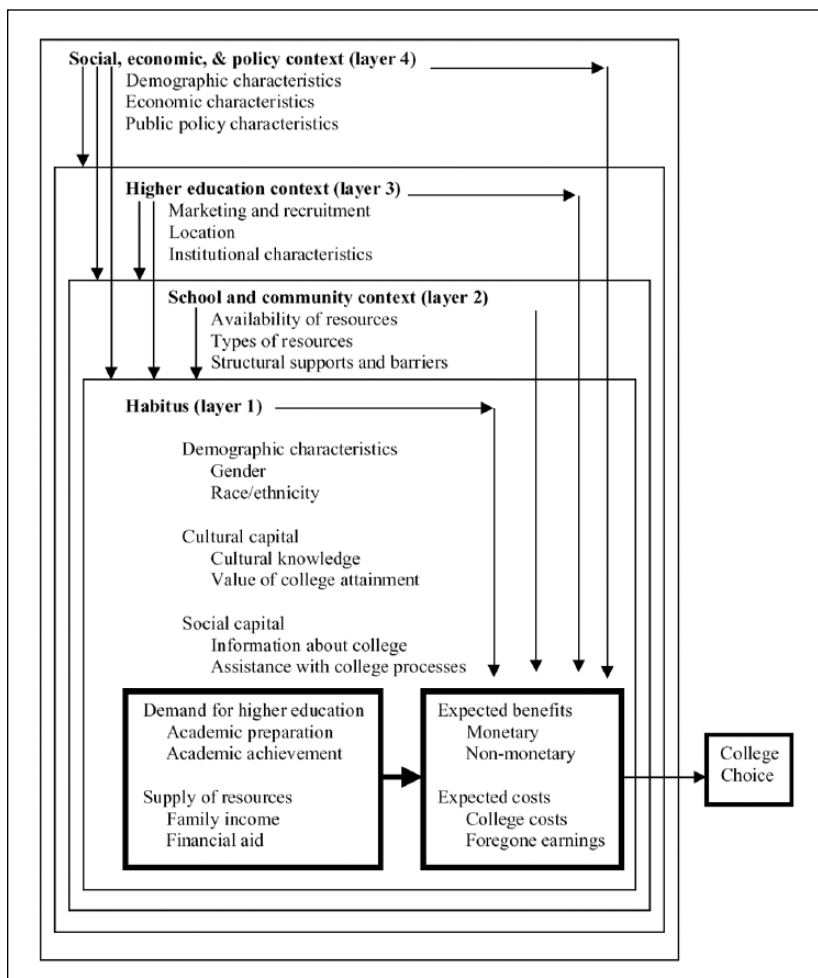
We feel that until a federal policy granting increased access is implemented, we should work to assist undocumented students in all states. Indications from the Trump administration suggest more restrictive immigration policies may be forthcoming. The NACAC issued a statement following President Donald Trump's executive order that would strip federal funding from "sanctuary cities"—places that have policies in place to not prosecute those who are undocumented. NACAC notes that the order will have a negative impact on those who are protected under former President Barack Obama's executive order on DACA. To properly address immigration reform, NACAC has urged the President to work with Congress to pass the DREAM Act, legislation that would allow undocumented individuals to gain citizenship if they meet certain requirements.

In this climate, the type of work taking place with Freedom U becomes that much more valuable to all students. College access for undocumented students is a relevant issue facing our nation during this time in which many of our political conversations involve immigration and college attainment. Organizations like Freedom University and U-Lead Athens have proven that they can work to help undocumented students reach their academic goals, even when the challenges are great. By assisting students in expanding their educational and career opportunities, Freedom University empowers students in finding the freedom we all deserve.

It is clear from having worked alongside both the students and faculty at Freedom U that positive things are happening within students' lives. Many students have gone on to attend selective colleges and universities across the United States, while others continue to attend Freedom U with hopes of one day joining their peers. More than anything, students have gained a new self-worth and confidence that seemed to be lacking for many of them.

While the term *undocumented* may pertain to their current immigration status, it does not define who they are as people. These are the children of immigrants who are attempting to live the American dream while working hard each day to better their lives. We have been fortunate to develop relationships with many of these students and are continually inspired by their determination in the face of unimaginable challenges. What began as a program in Athens, Georgia, Freedom University has since developed into an ever-growing network of students and activists with one goal in mind—to help students find the freedom to achieve their dreams.

Appendix – Perna's (2006) Conceptual Model of Student College Choice



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Notes

1. See *Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982).
2. Augusta University was formerly called Georgia Regents University until the name was changed in 2015. Georgia Regents University was created in 2012 as a result of merging Augusta State University and Georgia Health Sciences University, formerly known as the Medical College of Georgia.
3. Between 2011 and 2017, Georgia merged 18 institutions into nine, thus reducing the current total number of state institutions to 26.
4. “DACA” refers to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a 2012 executive order signed by former President Barack Obama that allows undocumented persons who are eligible to avoid deportation while also being able to secure a driver’s license and work permit. It applies to all undocumented immigrants who came to the United States before the age of 16 years, are younger than 31 years (as of June 15, 2012), are high school graduates or are in college, or have served in the military.
5. The HOPE (Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally) scholarship program is a merit-based scholarship program only offered to students residing in Georgia who attend in-state public or private institutions. It provides scholarship support for qualifying students who meet minimum grade and test score thresholds. To learn more about the program, visit <https://gsfc.georgia.gov/hope>.

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